

Rogue's Recipe

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Elizabeth Grice on a cad of the kitchen and the relaunch of his masterpiece, a manual of both cookery and seduction

Bill Fowler's Cumbrian kitchen was not a place for faint-hearts or feminists. He made manly dishes in his messy, manly way and then, on the promise of a few stiff gins, lured a susceptible local woman over to deal with the namby-pamby bits of cuisine he couldn't be bothered to do himself: Flakey Flossie for the pastry-making and Luscious Lettie to prepare the salads.



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The man's technique was shameless. "Don't kiss her till she has carried out her duties," he warns in his manual of cookery and seduction. "You will find the situation gets completely out of hand and you end up, hours later, with no gin and no lid on

your pie."

The wonder is that he ever managed to finish a dish, let alone a cookbook. But that is only one of the many wonders of his culinary masterpiece, *Countryman's Cooking*, a book so red-blooded, so gloriously politically incorrect and so unfashionably informative that it slices clean through the genre like a meat cleaver.

William Menzies Weekes Fowler, who loved nothing better than hunting, shooting, fishing, cooking, eating and womanising, is not exactly a man of our times, but a man whose time has come.

When he published his book in 1965, it flopped as resoundingly as a sheep's head into his slops bucket and he took to trying to flog it in the pubs of the Eskdale Valley, where he lived. He died in 1977, neither knowing nor guessing that his casseroled grouse, his Tatie Pot - "Take one medium-sized sheep (preferably somebody else's) and reduce it to handy-sized pieces" - and his scathing view of politicians, farming methods and food snobs would make him a posthumous bestseller 40 years on. Flakey Flossie and Luscious Lettie, the Salad Queen, definitively spiced the mix.

The story of the book is almost as good as the book itself. David Burnett, a small, single-handed publisher from Ludlow, Shropshire, came across *Countryman's Cooking* by W.M.W. Fowler in an Oxfam shop three years ago and bought it for 50p because he was intrigued to see that the author with the memorable initials was a friend of one of his former fishing pals.

He liked the forthright, irreverent style and the pungent whiff of real cooking. The man was evidently a bounder, but what a fund of common sense, what country knowledge, what a cook! Every recipe Burnett tried out on members of his little dining club in Ludlow was a resounding success and many slap-up meals later he got around to thinking about republishing them.

Sporting a new dust jacket with an illustration by Robert Gillmor, but otherwise faithful to the original and its Thomas Bewick engravings, the book came out at the end of last year. It looked set to join Burnett's other beautiful but slow-moving Excellent Press titles on esoteric country matters such as *Fly Fishing for Grayling and Pike* and *the Pike Angler*. Then a newspaper published some of Fowler's hearty, traditional recipes under a handsome black and white photo of him. All hell broke loose in Burnett's attic office in Ludlow. His print run of 1,000, which he expected to shift over three years, was gone in a morning.

The phone rang all day for three days. Burnett staggered to the post office every evening under such a colossal weight of books that he damaged his knee and had to enlist the help of a local furniture restorer with packing and posting. In the first two weeks, he lost weight because he had no time to eat.

He ordered another print run - and another and another. All the books were snapped up. Sales are now nudging 10,000. Television companies formed a disorderly queue to talk about rights. One, Jamie Oliver's company, is even now discussing a documentary about the life and times of Bill Fowler.

"It was miraculous," says Burnett. "This was something that had fallen through the

floorboards and been forgotten. I thought I was taking a risk. My usual 'sell' is about 600 over three years. Until all this, you could pick up a copy of the original, published by Arlington Books, for a fiver, but now they are changing hands for between £50 and £100 a copy. A bookseller in Wales offered one for £150 on AbeBooks. The chap who produced the Jamie Oliver programmes was terrifically hyped up and rang me in the night, pressing me to sell him an option."

Fowler's introduction sets the tone: "This book is written for men. Men who, through choice or circumstance, live on their own, so that they can give a small dinner party and at the same time remain on speaking terms with their friends." Men, he might have added, who like to snare women as well as rabbits, woodcock and wigeon. Men who give equal weight to polishing their chat-up lines and their dissecting skills. Improvisers, free-thinkers, food-lovers and blackguards.

His macho preparation of rabbit pie, for instance, goes only as far as skinning and eviscerating the animal and cooking the meat. After that, he relies on "liberal use of blandishments and flattery" to procure himself a glamorous pastry-maker, or "minion". "What better gambit could you have," he asks, than: 'Come and make the pastry for my rabbit pie, darling?'" When she turns up - and women always turned up for Fowler - he advises fortifying her with a couple of stiff gins before letting her loose with flour, lard and a rolling-pin. "Look admiring and make encouraging noises from a safe distance."

Fowler gives a hilarious spoof recipe for cormorant ("Hang up by the feet with a piece of wire, soak in petrol and set on fire...") and admits that while he was a prisoner of war, dreaming obsessively of food, he once cooked the commandant's cat with a black-market onion.

Fowler's book is much more than a guide to the ways and means to good, hearty food. Or even a lark. It is also an idiosyncratic, irreverent philosophy of life and that goes a long way to explaining why it is flying out of Burnett's attic.

Fowler is magnificently opinionated and his opinions on almost everything from river pollution to battery chickens have a prescience that makes them horribly relevant today. Though intensive farming was in its infancy in the Sixties, he lays into it with the fervour of a modern activist. Insecticides, artificial fertiliser, antibiotics, pellet-feeding... he saw all the potential dangers and knew exactly where to lay the blame. "Nothing will ever be done about it," he moaned, "even if these things are proved to be harmful. Too many people are cashing in." Farmers, he concludes, are "just about as callous and selfish a body of men as you could well find".

But for all the breezy prose and mischievous digressions, Fowler was a troubled man who eventually ruined himself through helter-skelter womanising, roistering and drink.

His second wife, Toni Richards, who was married to him for 12 years but loved him for 30, says: "He loved women and women loved him, as who wouldn't? He had charm, character, good looks. They fell in droves. He was a great laugh - and for that he has my vote - but a marriage doesn't work with only one person in it. I got fed up with all the other women floating around. It was too much.

"He behaved very badly towards the end. It was the booze that did it. He discovered

how to make his own hooch and would drink it immediately. His liver was like a rock. He had the self-destruct button firmly pushed in. Silly, silly man. He had so much going for him."

They met at a St Valentine's Day hop in 1946. Fowler, a Wellington bomber pilot who had been shot down over Munster in 1941, was still in rehabilitation after three years as a prisoner of war in the notorious Stalag Luft III camp. "He was, oh, heartbreakingly handsome. Six feet tall. My kind of man. As far as I was concerned, that was it. He was the one. He was just picking up the totty and he picked up me."

But Fowler had married a girl called Mesnil before he went into action because he knew his chances of survival were slim, and Mesnil was now expecting his baby. That did not deter Fowler from pursuing Slosh, as he called Toni ("he never thought much of marriage") and they had a passionate affair. Slosh then settled for an unexciting marriage and two daughters in High Wycombe but they remained in touch. Fowler, shuttling between Cumbria and Brixham, Devon, on one of his many failed money-making exploits, would visit her. "He was always turning up."

His marriage had survived for only a year and when, years later, Slosh wrote to him to say she was getting divorced, he replied: "Don't move. I'm coming to see you."

Slosh left her two daughters to be with him and they married in 1958, Fowler wearing his crumpled demob suit. "I thought: 'Gotcha, after all this time.' It was what I'd wanted for years." Fowler's 13-year-old son, Timothy, took the wedding picture of them, posed awkwardly against the sea at Ravenglass.

They shared exuberant good times in a granite cottage, Knott End Farm, in the Eskdale Valley. Naively optimistic about his ability to make a fortune for very little effort, Bill went into boats, then mink and finally daffodils. Slosh (so named because he discovered that her schoolgirl expletive had been Sloshy Bonk) recalls how, during the mink farming episode, his moustache would always smell unappetisingly of mink when he kissed her.

Fowler, she says, had a wonderfully unsentimental sympathy with wildlife and a countryman's deep knowledge of its ways. In the kitchen, however, their roles were as polarised along sexist lines as in the book. "He would leap about, preparing and cooking food to die for - but the mess! I would make the puddings, help with the vegetables and do the washing-up. He had enormous imagination and flair. Sometimes now when I'm cooking, I'll pick up the book to 'see what Bill says'. An hour later I am still reading it, falling about laughing."

Bill Fowler was a gifted, spoilt boy. He hated his public school in Durham and confided that he sometimes thought of throwing himself off the bridge. Though naturally left-handed, he was made to write with his right hand and this caused him to stammer.

His mother was not very demonstrative and he bonded firmly with his father through a love of country pursuits. Frank Fowler, a schoolteacher, kept a wartime diary in which he writes longingly of his son's return from the PoW camp in Poland and how they would revisit their old fishing haunts. But he died of a heart attack two days after his son's return. His death seems to have destabilised Bill, who was already deeply bitter about the lack of RAF pay while in the Stalag and generally resentful of

authority.

"When they came back," says Burnett, who knew of Fowler through a mutual friend, Hugh Falkus, "they were given a suit of civilian clothes and waved goodbye. Bill never worked for anybody after that. He was an independent spirit who hated authority. It ran deep. He wouldn't knuckle under again."

Fowler never wrote another book after *Countryman's Cooking*, though he thought of recounting his wartime incarceration under the title *Countryman in the Bag*. It's doubtful that his health and suicidal lifestyle would have allowed it. Slosh moved up the coast to Gosforth to escape the chaos Bill caused around him, but she never gave up on him, or he her. "I would come home to find a little note on my cooker asking me to share supper with him - and I would."

She visited him throughout his final illness and cooked him a last supper, of brill. When he died in 1977, she discovered that three months earlier he had secretly married Freda, his housekeeper and nurse.

Slosh is now 84. The success of Fowler's book, which is dedicated to her, is thrilling: "I have never been so pleased. It never got the attention it should have." When she saw the new edition, she cried floods of tears.

Fowler, true to form, ends his book unable to resist one last double entendre. "The old compulsive urge for a bit of steak and kidney pie is stealing over me again," he writes, beguilingly. "My weak will is one of my most prized possessions. Where's that telephone - 'Flossie, darling...'"

- To order *Countryman's Cooking* by W M W Fowler (Excellent Press) for £14.95 plus £1.25 p&p, call Telegraph Books on 0870 428 4112